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**STRATEGIC STUDIES INSTITUTE
US ARMY WAR COLLEGE
Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania**

US MILITARY STRATEGIC OPTIONS.

by

Colonel Harry G. Summers, Jr.

11 22 January 1981

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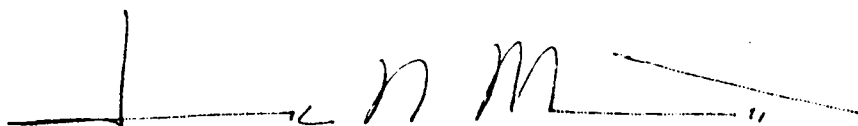
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FOREWORD

This memorandum examines the selection of US strategic military options, beginning with discussion of the nature of the US military. Using the official definition of military strategy—i.e., “employing the armed forces . . . to secure the objectives of national policy”—the author draws a distinction between conduct of war and preparation for war and provides a series of military planning interrogatories. These interrogatories, in the form of the classic principles of war, provide the questions the military planner must address to ensure that strategic planning options serve the interests of the United States.

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This memorandum was prepared as a contribution to the field of national security research and study. As such, it does not reflect the official view of the College, the Department of the Army, or the Department of Defense.



JACK N. MERRITT
Major General, USA
Commandant



BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF THE AUTHOR

COLONEL HARRY G. SUMMERS, JR. has been assigned to the Strategic Studies Institute since the summer of 1979. He holds a bachelor's and master's degree in military arts and science, and was an instructor in strategy at the US Army Command and General Staff College from 1968 to 1971. During seven years service on the Army General Staff he served as a political-military staff officer for the Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations and Plans and as a strategic analyst for three successive Army Chiefs of Staff. He is the author of numerous articles on military strategy in professional journals.

SUMMARY

This memorandum examines the selection of US military strategic options. Beginning with a discussion of the unique nature of the US military and its relation to the American people, it highlights the inherent limitations this relationship entails. Using the official definition of military strategy—employing the armed forces to secure the objectives of national policy—it draws a distinction between those actions necessary for war preparation and those necessary for the conduct of war. It concludes with a series of military planning interrogatories in the form of the classic principles of war. The author believes that these interrogatories provide the military strategic planner with a framework for analysis as well as the proper questions to ensure that strategic planning options serve the interests of the United States.

US MILITARY STRATEGIC OPTIONS

... The United States maintains military forces to defend its territory and people, to honor its external security commitments, to maintain its freedom of action, and to insure domestic tranquility.

FM 100-1, *The Army*¹

In order to provide for the common defense the Constitution of the United States empowered the Congress, among other things, with the authority to raise and support armies. In the National Security Act of 1947, as amended, the Congress directed that the Department of Defense maintain and employ armed forces to accomplish three primary missions: defend the American homeland from external attack; safeguard our internal security; and uphold and advance the national policies and interests of the United States, including insuring the security of areas vital to those interests.

As we in the military attempt to determine how best to accomplish these tasks, there are several historical realities that must be considered. First, although military policies are often justified in terms of the first mission—protection of the homeland—it is the third mission—protection of American worldwide interests—that has most often led to the commitment of American armed forces. One reason is that the first mission is easy to articulate. It was easier to say “fight them in Vietnam or fight them in the streets of San Francisco” than it was to attempt to explain the complex network of interests behind our Vietnam policy. Secondly, “protection” is much less open to argument than “interests” over which one may or may not agree. But as Vietnam illustrated, this divergence between what we were doing and what we said we were doing led to such serious problems as the “credibility gap” and the

loss of public support. As Senator Jacob Javits observed, "We have failed to perceive that people will probably respond to arguments made on the basis of enlightened self-interest The apocalyptic language of the past has tended to deceive those who used it as well as those who got the message." Care must be taken to avoid jeopardizing American public support for their military with misstatements—either intentional or unintentional—of what their military is about.

The second historical reality is that we are not very good at predicting future events. For example, as we emerged from World War II the location of our next conflict—Korea—could not even be found on most world maps. It was still labeled by its Japanese name, Chosen. By the same token, as we emerged from the Korean War the maps of the world did not show Vietnam. It was still part of French Indochina. Not only were they not on the maps, they were not on the minds of the military planners. It is as true now as it was then that we cannot know the future. While scenarios of likely conflict areas are of some utility in contingency planning, we must not become so fixated by such scenarios that we lose our flexibility to cope with real conflicts.

With these caveats in mind we can then consider the question of US Military Strategic Options. For the purposes of analysis the question can be broken into three major parts. The first part has to do with the nature of the "US military," a unique organization with specific strengths and weaknesses. The second has to do with the meaning that we attach to the word "strategic," especially as modified by the word "military." Finally we must provide a framework of analysis for "options."

US MILITARY STRATEGIC OPTIONS

The first point of analysis is the unique nature of the American armed forces. Although the fact is often ignored, the American military is not a creature of the Executive Department alone. It belongs to the American people who take a proprietary interest in its employment. It is manned by their sons and daughters, maintained and supplied by their tax dollars, and its very existence depends on their elected representatives in the Congress. This means that it cannot be committed over the long-term without the support and consent of the American people. This gives us tremendous advantages but it also imposes some limitations.

The first limitation is one that has constantly plagued the military in peacetime—the difficulty of convincing the American people that the best way to preserve peace is to be prepared for war. Safe behind the great ocean barriers for most of its existence, with no hostile armies massed on its borders, America could ignore the need for military preparedness. Although intellectually we have accepted the fact that modern weapons technology has eroded our geographic defenses and dissipated the time we once could count on to mobilize, emotionally many Americans still cling to the isolationism of the 19th century. The complexities and interdependence of the modern world has further confused matters. Former Chief of Staff General Creighton Abrams once observed that at one time the task was to convince the Kansas wheat farmer to give us some of his money to protect him from the Russians. “Now,” he said, “the task is to get him to give us some of the money he made selling wheat to the Russians in order that we can protect him from the Russians.” It is an ironic fact of life that to the degree that we succeed in deterring aggression and reducing tensions, such success erodes public support for the very forces that made deterrence and detente possible.

The second limitation is an outgrowth of the first. Our military capabilities are a direct reflection of the force levels, equipment and material approved by the Congress. These in-being capabilities play an important part in shaping available options. It is important to note, however, that there is often a gap between our actual capabilities and the expectations of the American people. Immediate response to threats to American security are expected and, in the past—at Bataan, at Kasserine Pass and at the Pusan Perimeter—this gap between capabilities and expectations was bridged by the sacrifice of American soldiers who bought preparedness time at the price of their lives. The American people have to understand that “you can pay now (with preparedness and materiel) or you can pay later (with American lives)” for, unless history totally reverses itself, there is no way the price of military preparedness can be avoided in this imperfect world.

The third limitation—if indeed it is a limitation—is that there are “strings” on the commitment of US military forces. This constraint was written into our Constitution which gave the power to declare war to the Congress rather than to the President. Until the Korean War this restriction was generally honored and, except for

relatively minor commitments of short duration, the President sought a declaration of war from the Congress before committing forces. The breach of this restriction in Korea and again in Vietnam led to the 1973 War Powers Resolution. This resolution requires the President to consult with the Congress before military forces are committed and, unless Congress specifically authorizes it by a declaration of war, resolution or legislation, the involvement cannot be continued over 90 days. While this "limitation" certainly inhibits the President's commitment of US forces in support of foreign policy, this inhibition was precisely the reason for the Constitutional division of war powers and the Congressional War Powers Resolution. Since it is intentional, it is arguable whether such restrictions are a "limitation" or are a fundamental feature of the American armed forces.

US MILITARY STRATEGIC OPTIONS

The second part of our analysis has to do with the definition of strategy itself, and in particular military strategy. We read about how we used to have a 2½ war strategy and now we have a 1½ war strategy. We hear about "grand strategy" and "national strategy" and about strategy itself. For our purposes we will use the "book" definition from the Joint Chiefs of Staff *Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, which defines military strategy as:

The art and science of *employing the armed forces of a nation to secure the objectives of national policy* by the application of force, or the threat of force.¹

This is close to the classic definition given by Clausewitz 150 years ago. "Tactics teaches the use of armed forces in the engagement," he said, "strategy, the use of engagements for the object of the war."⁴ His definition of the "object" paralleled our own: "The political object is the goal, war is the means of reaching it, and the means can never be considered in isolation from their purpose."⁵

Clausewitz also made another distinction that is important to our analysis. He stressed the importance of discriminating between two complementary but dissimilar activities characteristic of war—"preparation for war" and "war proper."⁶ Although dependent on the former, military strategy is primarily concerned with the

latter—war proper. By definition, military strategy deals with the issue of *employing* the armed forces rather than merely preparing them for employment. With this distinction it is clear that our so-called “2½ or 1½ war strategies” are not really “strategies” so much as they are extensions of force planning for preparation for war. By mislabeling them as strategies we not only confuse ourselves but also confuse our framework for analysis. As we will see, “preparation for war” and “war proper” operate on entirely different philosophical and conceptual planes.

Earlier we emphasized the importance of understanding that the US military had certain peculiar characteristics that must be taken into account. The same is true of military forces themselves. They are designed, equipped and trained for a specific task—to fight and win on the battlefield. They are, in effect, a battle axe. Often in the past we have tried to use them to accomplish tasks for which they were not designed—nation-building in Vietnam being the most recent case in point. Perhaps the most dangerous misuse of military force is the attempt to use them to bluff a potential adversary when they do not have the necessary combat power (the combination of both materiel and moral strength) to carry out the threat if the bluff is called. If we are to use our armed forces to deter a potential adversary we must remember Clausewitz’s warning:

Combat is the only effective force in war; its aim is to destroy the enemy’s forces as a means to a further end. That holds good even if no actual fighting occurs, because the outcome rests on the assumption that if it came to fighting, the enemy would be destroyed.

US MILITARY STRATEGIC OPTIONS

With this understanding of the nature of the US military and of the definition of military strategy, we can now apply them to the third element of our analysis—strategic options. In military parlance this element is known as *contingency planning*. Before we begin however, we need to emphasize the distinction made earlier between “preparation for war” and “war proper.” As we said, the so-called “2½ and 1½ war strategies” dealt with preparation for war. They were an outgrowth of our Planning, Programing and Budgeting System (PPBS). PPBS complements strategic thinking and systems analysts, both military and civilian, have an essential role to play. Their work in weapons design and materiel

acquisition, in manpower procurement and in *force planning* determines the means that we will have available on the outbreak of war. Distinctly removed from this process is the theory of war proper, which operates on an entirely different philosophical and conceptual basis. Where "preparation for war" deals with fixed values, physical quantities and unilateral action, "war proper" is concerned with variable quantities, intangible forces and effects, and the continual interaction of opposites. In peacetime this theory is represented by *contingency plans*. The task of the contingency planner (the military strategist) is to determine "how" to use the means available to attain or assist in attaining the political objectives of the United States. Shortfalls developed in the course of such an analysis are identified to our civilian leaders. They have the choice of accepting the risk, modifying the political objectives so they are in line with military capabilities, or changing their program guidance to be force planners so as to increase our capabilities.

With this background we can now examine the tools with which to apply our military judgment to national security issues. Among these "tools" are the principles of war. As Professor Peter Paret pointed out in his new translation of Carl von Clausewitz's *On War*, such theories are not designed to serve as immutable rules but instead give "points of reference and standards of evaluation . . . with the ultimate purpose not of telling [us] how to act but of developing [our] judgment."⁸ Their primary value is in providing what Colonel Charles A. Hines calls "military planning interrogatories."

The first principle of war is the principle of *The Objective*. It is the first principle because all else flows from it. It is the strategic equivalent of the mission statement in tactics and we must subject it to the same rigorous analysis as we do the tactical mission. How to determine military objectives that will achieve or assist in achieving the political objectives of the United States is the primary task of the military strategist, thus the relationship between military and political objectives is critical. Prior to any future commitment of US military forces our military leaders must insist that the civilian leadership provide tangible, obtainable political goals. The political objective cannot be merely a platitude, but must be stated in concrete terms. While such objectives may very well change during the course of the war, it is essential that we begin with an understanding of where we intend to go. As Clausewitz said, we

should not "take the first step without considering the last."⁹ In other words, we (and perhaps more important, the American people) need to have a definition of "victory." This victory need not be a total destruction of the enemy or the complete conquest of his territory. It need only be the attainment of a political goal that prompted our involvement, such as the restoration of the status quo ante in the Korean War. It is recognized that obtaining such an objective will not be an easy task. There is an inherent contradiction between the military and its civilian leaders on this issue. For both domestic and international political purposes the civilian leaders want maximum flexibility and maneuverability and are hesitant to fix on firm objectives. The military on the other hand need just such a firm objective as early as possible in order to plan and conduct military operations. What we are faced with is the obverse of the problem President Kennedy faced when he issued an order in 1961 directing the Joint Chiefs of Staff to be "more than military men." Just as the military need to be aware of political, economic, and social issues, so our civilian leadership must be aware of the imperatives of military operations.

The first imperative of military operations is an understanding of Clausewitz's warning that "war is not an exercise of the will directed at inanimate matter, as in the case of the mechanical arts . . . in war, the will is directed at an animate object that *reacts*."¹⁰ This dictum is often ignored, and a common failing in warfare is the tendency to factor out the enemy. This is the essential difference between plans and operations. Contingency plans are just what their name implies—plans. Based on the best possible assumptions, they are the closest we can come in peacetime to anticipate the conduct of war. But warfare itself—operations—does not rest on assumptions but on the actions of the enemy who will be seeking to maximize his own advantage. This constant interaction is the very nature of warfare. This interaction is reflected in the second principle of war, *The Offensive*. While the first principle (*The Objective*) tells us where we are going, the second principle tells us how we are going to get there. Essentially we have four broad choices—the strategic offensive/tactical offensive, the strategic offensive/tactical defensive, the strategic defensive/tactical offensive, and the strategic defensive/tactical defensive. Choice of the strategic posture to be adopted is largely dependent on whether our objective gives us a positive aim such as

destruction of the enemy's armed forces and occupation of his homeland (as in World War II) or a negative aim such as defense of our own or our ally's homeland and repulse of enemy aggression (as in Korea and Vietnam). While this strategic posture will determine the overall conduct of the war, our tactical posture should be tailored to retain the initiative and defeat the enemy on the battlefield.

The strategic offensive is the classic way that wars are fought and won, but confronted with a nuclear-armed adversary (or the surrogate of such an adversary), the strategic offensive may not be a viable option. Our desire to avoid a nuclear war may force us to adopt the strategic defensive. One of the basic requirements for the strategic defensive is that time must be on our side. If it is not (as in Vietnam), then defeat is inevitable. Traditionally the United States has taken advantage of its technological and materiel strengths and relied heavily on attrition to defeat its enemies. The nature of such an approach to warfare was described by Georgetown University Professor Edward N. Luttwak in a recent article:

(Attrition) is war in the administrative manner, of Eisenhower rather than Patton, in which the important command decisions are in fact logistic decisions. The enemy is treated as a mere inventory of targets and warfare is a matter of mustering superior resources to destroy his forces by sheer firepower and weight of material.¹¹

Our own method of strategic planning—the Planning, Programing, and Budgeting System—predisposes us toward this administrative manner of waging war as does our reliance on computers with their heavy dependence on quantification. The effect of this can be deadly when confronted with an adversary like the Soviet Union with superiority in men and materiel. As Luttwak goes on to say, “If an inferior force remains tied by tradition and attitude to low-risk or low-payoff attrition methods, it must be defeated. In the cumulative destruction of the forces ranged against one another which characterizes an attrition contest, the inferior force will inevitably be exhausted first.”¹²

The way to avoid such a defeat, says Luttwak, is through the use of maneuver rather than attrition. Luttwak's definition of “Manoeuvre” incorporates the principles of *Mass*, *Economy of Force* and *Maneuver*:

Manoeuvre is not a familiar practice in recent American military operational form. In fact, in the language of the US Army, manoeuvre is frequently confused with mere movement, or at least offensive movement. Manoeuvre may well call for movement but it is very much more than that. It can be applied not only in ground combat but in all warfare, and indeed in all things military, even research and development. Manoeuvre describes 'relational' action—that is, action guided by a close study of the enemy and of *his* way of doing things—where the purpose is to muster some localized or specialized strength against the identified points of weakness of an enemy that may have superiority overall.¹³

Luttwak is correct that the principles of *Mass, Economy of Force* and *Maneuver* (what he calls "Manoeuvre") define how warfare should be conducted—to use these principles in interaction to strike at the enemy's center of gravity (what Luttwak calls the points of weakness) in order to obtain your ultimate objective—the purpose for which the war is being waged. While Luttwak goes on to discuss how these principles could be applied as part of a "Manoeuvre Defence for NATO," we will examine them in the context of US worldwide interests. *Mass* and *Economy of Force*, considered in tandem since they are often the reciprocal of each other, are critical principles for the United States. As we look at the World it is likely that we will face two intertwined phenomena: a continued bipolar confrontation with the Soviet Union, the only other worldwide military power and the only nation capable of destroying us; and at the same time threats to our interests from heavily armed Soviet surrogates and independent, militarily sophisticated Third World nations. This dichotomy has caused us serious difficulty in the past. In both Korea and Vietnam we became involved to blunt what we saw as an attempt by the Soviet Union and China to expand Communism by force of arms. But the fear of becoming involved in a war with the Soviet Union and China inhibited our efforts. Former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger put the problem succinctly, "Our perception of the global challenge at the same time tempted us to distant enterprises and prevented us from meeting them conclusively."¹⁴ We were constantly plagued during the Vietnam War with the dilemma over whether to mass to fight the war in Vietnam and employ an economy of force in Europe or whether to attempt to mass in both places simultaneously. This problem has not gone away. As Army Chief of Staff General Edward C. Meyer said in his *White Paper* 1980:

The most demanding challenge confronting the US military in the decade of the 1980s is to develop and demonstrate the capability to successfully meet threats to vital US interests outside of Europe, without compromising the decisive theater in Central Europe.¹⁵

Maneuver is another complicating factor. While movement is only one component of the principle of maneuver, it is an essential component since forces must be moved to the point of decision if they are to be effective. Although the MacKinder Theory of the heartland is supposedly out of date, the facts of geography remain. Our major adversary, the Soviet Union, is a continental power. The USSR can influence events in Western Europe, the Middle East and Northeast Asia merely by massing troops within her own borders. The United States by comparison is an insular power. In order to influence events we must deploy troops overseas. This places a premium on strategic sealift and airlift, as well as on base rights in strategic areas of the world. Lift is a priority item for the Army, since it must be moved to the point of decision. Although also important to the Navy and Air Force it is secondary to their primary responsibility for sea and air control. In a time of constrained budgets they can be expected to emphasize their higher priorities. One of the ways that we have attempted to alleviate this problem is through POMCUS—positioning of military equipment in strategic overseas locations, primarily in NATO. But this has been at the price of our worldwide flexibility and of the readiness of our forces here at home, since prepositioned equipment is not available for training. *Maneuver* poses serious strategic problems for the Army. As the *White Paper 1980* puts it:

Our capabilities to project combat power worldwide must be improved. We are approaching the upper limits of feasibility in the POMCUS programed for Europe. Further improvements must come from improved strategic mobility (particularly fast sealift), force structure changes, Host Nation Support, and, where possible, lighter more capable forces.¹⁶

Turning from the problem of *how* we are to wage war, we must also address the issue of *who* will command to insure the unity of our efforts. Failure to apply the principle of *Unity of Command* is probably the greatest single cause of defeat in war. This is an area that has plagued the American military for many years. The Department of Defense is charged with two distinct tasks. One is the normal peacetime task of preparation for war. The other is the task of conducting war itself. These divergent tasks would be

automatically reconciled in the event of total war, but they work against each other during limited war. Earlier we considered the need for both mass and economy of force in order to deal with deterrence of the Soviet Union as well as with the crisis at hand. The Vietnam War made it obvious that no single command structure can deal with both of these requirements. In the conduct of future contingency operations the present command structure within DOD should be modified to provide for a separate element to maintain our deterrence through continued preparation for war and another separate element to conduct the actual war itself.

With the next two principles, *Security and Surprise*, we run into a fundamental problem in the conduct of US military strategy options. That is the inherent conflict between a free and democratic American society and the need for security in the conduct of US military operations. Short of total war it is unlikely that the United States would impose total censorship over military operations. Our experience in Vietnam demonstrates what a serious problem this can become. Although there was no instance where the news media jeopardized *tactical* security and surprise, the very nature of their craft makes it almost impossible for them to preserve *strategic* security and surprise. The American people rightly demand to know what their government is doing and it is the responsibility of the news media to supply that information. In so doing however, they also supply such information to our enemies. North Vietnamese accounts of the war showed how closely they monitored the American media. There is no doubt that this inability of the United States to preserve strategic security causes us great problems. But the alternatives are even worse. As we saw in our discussion of the nature of the US military, it is a military that belongs to the American people who take a proprietary interest in its commitment. Imposition of total censorship would not only jeopardize the very basis of American society but would also sever the link between the American people and their military. The ultimate price could well be higher than any advantage that might accrue through improved US strategic security.

It is also important to recall the paradox of the Vietnam War where we were able to achieve strategic surprise with our initial ground force intervention and again with the 1972 "Christmas bombing" because the free and open American media acted as a kind of deception device. This paradox also illustrates another aspect of Security and Surprise that is an important part of

American strategic decisionmaking. During a briefing by the ODCSOPS Strategic Assessment Group in 1974, then Deputy Director of the CIA Lieutenant General Vernon Walters commented that if on 26 June 1950 a Russian spy was able to break into the Pentagon and the State Department and steal our most sensitive and Top Secret plans on Korea he would have found that we had no strategic interest whatsoever in that country. "But," General Walters went on, "the one place he couldn't break into was the mind of President Truman, and on 27 June 1950 we went to war over Korea." American vital interests are determined in large measure by the President alone, when he makes the decision to commit American forces to their defense. The resulting volatility and unpredictability of American action promotes both strategic surprise and strategic security and in so doing gives us a major strategic advantage. At the same time it imposes an enormous burden on the Armed Forces who must maintain the flexibility to be able to immediately respond to such decisions.

Such high-level strategic decisionmaking also has another impact. Especially in recent years, the prevalence of "leaks" within the Federal Government has made decisionmakers reluctant to commit sensitive planning and operational details to paper, and to provide those in the planning and operational chain with all the relevant data. This can have disastrous results. In the introduction to his 1943 translation of German General Waldemar Erfurth's *Surprise*, Dr. Stefan T. Possony quotes the Austrian World War I General Alfred Krauss. "Secrecy," General Krauss points out, "cannot be maintained by hiding one's intentions from subordinates. One should not believe that secrecy can be maintained if only a handful of superior officers know of the battle plan. Such secrecy is not desirable, because any operation must be thoroughly trained and rehearsed if it is to be successful." The solution to the problem of intragovernment security is beyond the purview of the Army but it is a problem that must be taken into account in future crises.

The last principle of war, *Simplicity*, has application both in generating public support and in the conduct of war itself. On the one hand the American people must understand what we are about and why their sacrifices are necessary. On the other hand we ourselves must understand what we are trying to achieve with the use of military force. Overly-complex and convoluted plans and operations should in themselves be a danger signal. As the 1949

version of the *Field Service Regulations* warned, "Simplicity of plans must be emphasized, for in operations even the most simple plan is usually difficult to execute. The final test of a plan is its execution; this must be borne constantly in mind during planning."¹⁸

CONCLUSION

Let us now briefly recap the question we began with: "How to determine US military strategic options?"

We must begin with an understanding that the American military is a unique institution. It cannot be committed without the support of the American people. Any planned option must fit this requirement.

Second, any future US military strategy option must be an appropriate military task within the capabilities of the American military. As former Chief of Staff General Fred C. Weyand said in the context of the Vietnam War, "there are certain tasks the American military can accomplish . . . they can defeat the enemy's forces on the battlefield. They can blockade the enemy's coast. They can cut lines of supply and communication. They can carry the war to the enemy on land, sea and air . . . but there are also fundamental limitations on American military power. . . . Congress and the American people will not permit their military to take total control of another nation's political, economic, and social institutions."¹⁹

Finally we must analyze any proposed US military strategy options in light of the principles of war to give us points of reference and standards of evaluation. As Clausewitz said "no one starts a war—or rather, no one in his senses ought to do so—without first being clear in his mind what he intends to achieve by that war and how he intends to conduct it."²⁰

ENDNOTES

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20. ABSTRACT (Continue on reverse side if necessary and identify by block number) This memorandum examines the selection of US strategic military options, begin- ning with a discussion on the nature of the US military. Using the official definition of military strategy--i.e., "employing the armed forces. . .to secure the objectives of national policy"--the author draws a distinction between conduct of war and preparation for war, and provides a series of military plan- ning interrogatories. These interrogatories, in the form of the classic prin- ciples of war, provide the questions the military planner must address to ensure that strategic planning options serve the interests of the United States.			

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